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ABSTRACT

Unlike traditional K-12 programs, which educate youth to take their place in society, the GED (General Educational Development) Tests certify that adults possess the major and lasting outcomes of a high school program of study. Instead of a high school diploma that signifies the successful completion of a particular course of study, the GED diploma validates the academic knowledge and skills required for admission to further education or employment opportunities. In K-12 programs, content knowledge is the measure of success; the GED tests' performance standard is the understanding and application of concepts. The GED's success rests not on replicating the K-12 experience, but on recognizing the utility of the credential as a passport of the individual and the acceptance of the credential by both academic and corporate organizations. The GED tests have been redrawn and renormed several times to reflect the change from an industrial to an information age and to incorporate the need for higher-level skills. The challenge for the GED test writers is to continue to develop an assessment instrument that is valid and reliable for the intended purpose--the award of a high school level diploma. The year 2000 series tests must first align with the national, jurisdictional, and state standards and performance initiatives to ensure that jurisdictions will continue to award a high school equivalency diploma based on passing the battery of tests. Further, this diploma must have value for the individual as a validation of academic skills, as well as be able to convey the value of those skills to various organizations. (KC)

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The Value of the GED Tests

by Josh Anchin, Executive Director, GED Testing Service

As the K-12 education standards debates rage globally, there is another debate occurring within the adult education community. In the current climate, the measure of success is frequently linked to economic gain. This climate highlights the tension surrounding this second debate between those who promote workplace skills and those who advocate further academic training. The GED Program rejects this bifurcation as misguided. Throughout its 55-year history, the GED Program has assessed a set of skills required for both the worlds of academia and work.

Historical Context

The GED Tests were created in response to a societal need that grew out of WWI, when many GIs returned home and entered college. At the time, postsecondary institutions recognized years of service as eligibility for entrance. In anticipation of veterans returning from WWII, the United States Armed Forces Institute commissioned the American Council on Education (ACE) to develop the GED Tests to assess the level of and help veterans meet their educational and vocational goals without returning to the high school classroom. After WWII, it became apparent that civilians who had not completed high school could also benefit from the GED Tests. With the introduction of a state-sponsored diploma program in 1947, New York transformed the GED from a national testing operation to a comprehensive high school credentialing program managed jointly with the various jurisdictions. Over the next several decades, ACE forged a partnership with all 50 states and 11 Canadian provinces to award a high school credential based on passing the GED test battery.

The validity and credibility of the GED Testing Program depends on the periodic review of the GED Tests' goals and specifications. The fact that there have been only three generations of tests from 1942 through 1998 indicates the strength of the test specification and standard setting process. While the content areas of English, Science, Social Studies, Literature/Reading, and Mathematics have remained constant over the last half-century, the constructs by which individuals are assessed have evolved.

The first generation of tests, developed in 1942, reflected an industrial era, when high school education was sufficient for many jobs. Content knowledge was assessed in a traditional manner. The English test focused on the correctness and effectiveness of expression, while success in social studies, science, and literature depended on interpreting reading materials. By the time this series was retired in 1977, over 40% of the test takers took the tests for employment reasons—an indication that this level of education qualified people for many entry-level positions. During this same period, 37% indicated that they planned further study.

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GED Tests...

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By the mid-1970s, changes in secondary curricula and attitudes toward education among the general public necessitated a review of the GED test specifications. This review resulted in the development of the second generation of tests, introduced in 1978. The definition of the skills and the release of the tests were on the closing cusp of the industrial age. The changes shifted the emphasis from reading materials in science and social studies to a reading test and introduced the transition from "recall" or factual knowledge to concept items in these subjects. The items assumed that examinees had prior knowledge that they could apply—giving rise to the application and evaluation items on the GED Tests. The tests maintained the emphasis on demonstrating the designated high school outcomes, but introduced life-like contexts into many of the test items. They also introduced many reading materials likely to be encountered in an adult's daily life, such as schedules and newspaper articles.

As societal needs have continued to change, so have the GED Tests. With the release of John Naisbitt's *Megatrends* in 1982, there was a heightened awareness of the shift from an industrial to an information-based society. These trends included the move to the commonplace use of technology, to a global awareness, and to a participatory democracy. As these changes were affecting adults, the GED staff initiated a five-year review process, combining the efforts of people throughout the adult and secondary educational communities. While they affirmed that the academic content areas of GED Tests were appropriate, they recommended five changes. These changes were incorporated in the current test series released in 1988 and included (a) a direct writing sample; (b) the increased emphasis on the critical thinking and problem-solving skills; (c) an increased reflection of the diversity of roles adults play in society; (d) a greater emphasis on understanding the sources of change in society; and (e) an increase in the contextual settings relevant to adults.

The Value of the Credential

Control Your Destiny or Someone Else Will, the story of how one man is remaking a Fortune 500 company to be the most competitive corporation in the world, was released in 1993. Although few of the more than 800,000 GED candidates who take tests each year probably read the book, they embody its spirit. More than 90% of them take the tests to gain the opportunity to further their educational or occupational goals. The remaining 10% take the exam for personal satisfaction.

The GED Testing Service (GEDTS) reported that in 1997 about 70% of the candidates took the tests to continue their education, almost double the 37% of the 1970s. Whether or not the candidates are aware of the research, they probably have an intuitive sense that economic success and higher levels of education are positively and strongly correlated. More than 90% of colleges and universities in the United States have policies to admit GED graduates. To examine the predictive validity of the GED diploma, several research studies have examined the success in college of GED graduates as compared with regular high school graduates. In 1993 Baldwin presented a synthesis of research findings comparing GED diploma and high school recipients on postsecondary educational outcomes. No significant differences were reported between grade point averages or ratios of credit hours passed to credit hours attempted. Others have reported similar findings.

An additional 26% of the 1997 candidates indicated that they took the tests for employment reasons. This is a significant decline from the 40% of the 1970s, reflecting the changing nature of work in our information society. While the GED Tests were not specifically designed to measure workplace readiness, a study was conducted to compare these skills with those measured by the GED Tests. This comparison by Webb in 1991 showed that almost all of the basic skills that employers value—as documented by the SCANS report—are measured by the current GED Tests, except for the affective or functional skills (e.g., leadership, speaking, etc.), which are not easily testable on a large-scale, high stakes test. This study further demonstrates the overlap between workplace skills and GED Test content.

For the final 10% of examinees, the value of passing the test is a personal one. Well after founder and CEO Dave Thomas was a household name through his Wendy's commercials, he publicly acknowledged that he had recently passed the GED Tests. Some, such as Thomas, may be seeking an opportunity to go back to the place of unfinished business and finish it. Still others may take the test to promote the value of education to their children or grandchildren. Whatever the reason for taking the test, for more than 50 years, the GED has provided a meaningful credential for both the individual who is seeking a high school diploma and the institutions that require them.

Comparative Research

Organizations often conduct studies to calibrate their measures with external ones to enhance both validity and value. GEDTS participated in two such studies, both comparing the performance of GED graduates with high school graduates on external measures and leading to the revision of the passing score.

In 1992, the GEDTS partnered with the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in a comparison study designed to use an external measure — the National Adult Literacy Survey Scales (NALS)—to describe the English-language literacy skills of individuals who passed the GED Tests and those who did not. Implications from this study indicated that (a) passing the GED Tests signifies, on average, the attainment of at least a moderate (level 3) level of prose, document, and quantitative literacy; and (b)

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NCAL Partnership to Bring Technology Training to Illinois

The National Center on Adult Literacy (NCAL), in partnership with the Central Illinois Adult Education Service Center (CIAESC) and the Lawrence Education Center, will provide technology training and planning initiatives for adult education instructors and administrators in Illinois beginning this fall. The project will involve the following:

- *Engaged Learning and Technology Applications in Adult Education*: workshops for instructors on the potential role of technology in creating suitable and engaging learning environments for adult learners.
- *Developing a Technology Plan to Meet Individual Program Needs*: workshops for administrators addressing a number of program-specific technology planning issues, including how to evaluate and implement technologies, and how to develop goals, budgets, evaluations, and timelines.

NCAL facilitators will conduct the workshops, customize materials for the participants, and establish online activities, communications resources, and support. For more information, contact CIAESC at 1-800-572-9033.

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higher scores on the GED correspond to higher scores on the NALS.

The 1994 National Education Goals Panel reported that "although adults who score below Level 3 in prose literacy do have some limited literacy skills, they are not likely to be able to perform the range of complex literacy tasks that the panel considers important for competing successfully in a global economy and exercising fully the rights and responsibilities of citizenship." To assure both the individual candidate as well as the organization that rely on the credential as an indicator of the GED graduate's performance level, the passing score was revised to strengthen the correlation with a level three literacy rating.

In 1993 Auchter and Skaggs conducted a second study which compared percentages of 1993 graduating seniors at specified letter-grade levels with those who achieved selected GED standard scores. The results of this study indicated that (a) GED scores correlate strongly and positively with high school grades; (b) significant percentages of graduating seniors with C or lower grades would not pass the GED test; and (c) more years of instruction and certain course taking patterns are associated with higher GED scores in the respective content area. This study substantiated the need for the GED Program to raise its minimum passing score to better discriminate among students with reported letter grades differing from A through F.

The results of these studies led to raising the standard for passing the GED Test battery, effective January 1997. This move was in concert with the secondary schools' requirement to raise standards. Based on the 1996 norming study that evaluated the performance of a stratified random sample of graduating high school seniors, the new standard is one that only 66% of graduating high school seniors can meet. Previously, the minimum passing standard was one that 75% of graduating seniors met. Preliminary results from the first full year of implementation indicate a 12% drop in the overall number of GED candidates meeting the revised score requirement.

A number of studies conducted to determine the value of the GED credential compare GED graduates with traditional high school graduates and dropouts, in both educational and workplace settings. Although these comparative studies are critical in determining the GED's value, they must be augmented by longitudinal studies in which the GED credential is assessed in terms of the candidates' stated goals. Because candidates take the test for different reasons, the value of the GED should also be assessed on an individual basis. Did the individual achieve the established goal? Is there an increase in value based on achieving that goal?

Future Value of the GED

Even though debates are raging about new educational standards and the value of the high school diploma as a valid indicator of performance in further education or the workplace, the high school diploma is still the bill of trade. Colleges and universities continue to admit students based on Carnegie Unit requirements, rank in class, and successful completion of a high school program of study. Many entry level jobs still rely on the high school diploma as a level of academic achievement. While the demand for the high school diploma remains, so does the value of the high school diploma as a means to access a higher goal. The GED Tests continue to assess the major and lasting academic outcomes in the core academic subjects that graduating high school seniors should know in the year 2000 and beyond.

However, academic subjects are intended to prepare students to enter both the workforce and college as knowledgeable and skilled participants. As noted earlier, it appears that the requirements of higher education and the workplace are coalescing in a way that reveals a false dichotomy: it is not an either/or situation, rather it's one of both/and. GEDTS must integrate the spheres of school and work.

Content standards developed at both the national and state level are the basis for the proposed changes. As a first step, GED staff analyzed the various national educational initiatives, identifying their commonalities. Following the manner in which GED diplomas are awarded, the GED staff then analyzed and synthesized the major content standards reported among several states. Further, they compared those states that had adopted standards to identify the alignment with the national standards. As the state and national standards were largely in agreement, they served as a foundation for specifications for the GED 2000 test series.

A panel of 29 experts representing the four academic disciplines of English Language Arts, mathematics, science, and social studies presented recommendations to determine the structure of the GED 2000 series tests. In keeping with the focus on adults who use the credential as a passport to both the workplace and postsecondary education, the 2000 series incorporates the following changes:

- *The addition of a new dimension of skills that are required for various settings.* Just as the current tests assess critical thinking skills across the academic tests, the GED 2000 specifications will be expanded to include the skills of communication and information processing. These three dimensions—critical thinking, communication, and information processing—will be reported on the score report in addition to the content areas. Communication skills include knowing how to develop a message for a variety of audiences and purposes, thus going beyond the traditional boundaries of English Language Arts to incorporate such skills as translating tables of numbers into pictographs or barcharts which present the same information in a user friendly fashion. Information processing includes knowing how to determine what information is needed, how to conduct a search for that information, how to synthesize information from diverse materials and in different media, and how to organize and present that information.

Beyond the transferability of common skills to the workplace, academic content is also important to the workplace. For example, knowledge about scientific principles, civics, mathematics, problem solving, and human behavior are relevant to strong workplace habits. Further, the content tests will also include different emphases. For example, the English Language Arts Test will reflect the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) framework and will require an additional section on informational texts. The math test will involve increased emphasis on data analysis, statistics, and probability.

- *The addition of a cross disciplinary test.* A separate test that applies to all disciplines will be included in the test battery. The stimulus in this test will not be modified to exclude all but one content area. Rather, this test will use authentic stimulus, which will allow examinees to apply information processing skills from a variety of academic disciplines to interpret the material.
- *The use of the calculator on the mathematics test.* Examinees will be allowed to use a calculator for approximately 80% of the test so that the stimulus material may include authentic charts and numbers, which may require lengthy calculations. The other 20% will exclude the use of the calculator so that estimation skills and

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number sense can be demonstrated.

- *The inclusion of alternate formats.* The tests will include constructed response items that can be objectively scored. This format removes the multiple selections without adding the expense of trained raters and the additional time required to generate the scores. The constructed responses will be limited to those that can be gridded on a machine-scorable answer sheet. For example, a math item would require a candidate to graph a slope or bubble in a numeric response.

Conclusion

Unlike traditional K-12 programs, which educate youth to take their place in society, the GED Tests certify that adults possess the major and lasting outcomes of a high school program of study. Unlike traditional K-12 programs, where the high school diploma signifies the successful completion of a particular course of study, the GED diploma validates the academic knowledge and skills required for admission to further education or employment opportunities. Unlike traditional K-12 programs, where content knowledge is the measure of success, the GED Tests' performance standard is the understanding and application of concepts. In short, the GED's success rests not on replicating the K-12 experience, but on recognizing the utility of the credential as a passport for the individual and the acceptance of the credential by both academic and corporate organizations.

The challenge for GEDTS is to continue to develop an assessment instrument that is valid and reliable for the intended purpose—the award of high school level diploma. The 2000 series test must first align with the national, jurisdictional, and state standards and performance initiatives to ensure that jurisdictions will continue to award a high school equivalency diploma based on passing the battery of tests. Further, this diploma must have value both for the individual as a validation of academic skills, as well as to convey the value of those skills to various organizations, from colleges to corporations and from trade schools to trade unions.

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